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AUTHOR	Montgomery, Becky; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Crisis nursery programs were developed to offer temporary relief from child care responsibilities for parents experiencing a crisis or extreme stress. While the programs focus on being helpful and supportive, they may seem threatening to some parents. Service providers need to understand parents' fears and concerns about using crisis nurseries and to offer services that are sensitive to parental needs and responsibilities. Parents' concerns include: their roles and responsibilities while using crisis nursery services; separation from their children; the child's safety; worry that the child may not want to return home; confidentiality of family information; and worry that they are giving up their rights to their child. Successful crisis nursery services are those that build trust, provide support, build communication, and are family focused. (JDD)

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Crisis Nursery Services — *Responding to Parental Concerns*

Introduction

Crisis nursery programs were developed to prevent child abuse and neglect and to increase family stability (thus preventing the need for out-of-home placement). Recognizing that there are times when parenting can be difficult, particularly when a family is experiencing a crisis or extreme stress, crisis nurseries offer temporary relief from child care responsibilities which allows time for parents to address their own needs. Traditionally, parents have received this help from extended family members or close friends. In today's mobile society, a network of extended family members and/or friends is not always available. In these situations, crisis nursery programs can offer assistance to parents in meeting their caregiving responsibilities.

While crisis nursery programs focus on being helpful and supportive, they may seem threatening to some parents. In order to ensure a positive experience for families, it is important for service providers to understand the fears and concerns parents may have about using crisis nurseries; and, to offer services which are sensitive to parental needs and responsibilities. This factsheet provides information about the types of concerns parents may have and suggests strategies to address these and other concerns. (In this factsheet, the term "parent" includes biological, adoptive, and foster parents, as well as other caregivers.)

Common Parent Concerns

Parents who have used crisis nursery services have expressed concerns about confidentiality; being labeled as abusive or inadequate; the quality of the child care offered by the crisis nursery; the safety of their children; how their children will feel about being away from home; what type of involvement parents will have with the program and what communication they will have with their children during their stay at the crisis nursery. In addition, parents identified a sense of isolation or loneliness as a barrier to using crisis nursery services.

Keys to Successful Crisis Nursery Services

- **Build Trust.** Trust is the foundation of successful crisis nursery services. Parents using the crisis nursery program need to feel welcomed. Crisis nursery staff should spend enough time with parents to establish a level of trust and mutual respect that will allow a free flow of information.
- **Provide Support.** Crisis nursery staff should be available to answer questions and concerns parents may have. This may include linking families with other organizations or services.
- **Build Communication.** How the program involves parents the moment they call or walk in the door determines whether the parents feel comfortable leaving their children in the care of the crisis nursery program. Staff members need to convey acceptance of the parents' understanding of their family situation. The most important message to communicate to the parent is "Parenting is hard work, I understand."
- **Be Family-focused.** Provide services which enhance parents' skills in making decisions for themselves and their families. Build on family strengths and offer options which meet the needs of the family rather than fitting the family into the service.

Program Considerations

When developing and implementing crisis nursery services, include strategies which reinforce parent involvement, are sensitive to separation and reunification issues, help ensure accessibility of services, and clearly outline parental rights and responsibilities.

The following information highlights some of the most frequently expressed concerns and suggests strategies for effective programming to meet these needs.

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Parents may have concerns about their roles and responsibilities while using crisis nursery services. Parents know their children best and parental involvement in crisis nursery services should be integrated throughout the program's components whenever possible. For example, during the initial admission procedures, parents need to assist with planning for the children's care. Parents can share information such as their children's medical history, routines, likes and dislikes, special needs and sleep habits. Parents may help prepare their children for crisis nursery care by explaining where they will be staying, what they will be doing, when they will telephone and when they will return for them. Parent involvement helps reassure parents that they will maintain their role as primary caregiver, provides ongoing involvement with their children and increases the effectiveness of program services.

Parents should be asked if they have ever been away from their children. If a parent and child have not been separated from one another before, both may experience separation anxiety. The parent's separation anxiety can be addressed through supportive listening and reassurance. Staff should ask parents how to soothe the children when they are upset.

One question parents often have about their children's care is, "Will my child be safe?" Safety questions can be addressed by inviting parents to tour the program's facility. Inform parents of the program's minimum requirements for child care, the state licensing requirements, and staff training requirements. If at all possible, arrange for the parent to meet a child care staff member at the time of the placement. If care is provided by crisis nursery staff in their own homes, invite the parent to meet with the providers and encourage them to ask questions about the home in which the child will be staying.

Parents sometimes worry that their children may not want to return home. Staff should reassure parents that the program's role is only temporary. Parents should have access to both the staff and their children while they are in a crisis care program setting. Parents may want to establish a regular communication schedule upon entering the program so their children will know when to expect a phone call or visit. Parents whose children receive care in private homes rather than a facility may experience higher anxiety about their childrens' desire to return home, especially if there are dramatic differences between the children's home and the crisis care provider's home. Programs should try to match the socioeconomic status of the provider family and consumer family to reduce these dramatic differences.

Parents may worry they are giving up their rights to their children when placing them in the care of a crisis nursery. Programs need to reassure parents that their family will remain intact. A crisis nursery program may find parents who, after placing their children in the crisis nursery program for the first time, come back for the children after a few hours. This is not an unusual phenomenon, and parents should certainly be encouraged to take their children home (if the situation at home has been resolved so that the child is in a safe environment) if that makes them feel more comfortable. Program staff should assure the parents that the crisis care services will continue to be available to them. Sometimes parents may want to use the crisis nursery program a few times and/or for very short stays before they are ready to leave their children there overnight or longer.

Crisis nursery programs should have written policies about the rights and responsibilities of parents while using the program. Parents should be directly involved in the development of these policies. Some of the issues which may be addressed by these policies include:

- the full extent of parents' rights when using the crisis nursery program;
- the rights and responsibilities of the agency to the children and the parents;
- agency policy regarding their ability to contact parents or another responsible person while children are in care;
- parental contact with children while they are in care;
- policies about the release of children to other adults (i.e., non-custodial parent, grandparents, etc.);
- agency policy with regard to suspected child abuse and neglect; and,
- emergency medical procedures for children in care.

Confidentiality is important to parents using crisis nursery programs. Parents may have concerns about revealing family secrets, being seen as an abuser or an unfit parent, or having their children removed from their home permanently. To reduce fear, each program should have a clear policy about providing confidential services in keeping with federal and state laws. Legal responsibilities to report suspected child abuse and neglect should also be shared with parents. The policy should be given to all parents using the services.

Geographic accessibility may be a potential barrier to parents considering the use of crisis nursery services. The program intake procedure may need to take into account the distance parents live from the care setting.

Intake may be arranged over the telephone or in decentralized locations within the community or rural areas. Arrangements need to be made to provide transportation for children and parents using the program. If possible, programs should not ask parents experiencing extreme crisis to transport their own children. Geographic distance also plays a part in the amount and type of contact parents can have with their children while in crisis care settings. The distance may make it impossible for parents to have physical contact with staff during their child's involvement in the program, so that telephone contact may become even more important for these families. Make sure the program and parents have correct telephone numbers readily available.

For parents who have children with disabilities or medically fragile conditions, concerns of facility accessibility and special care requirements need to be addressed. Specialized child care training may be conducted for crisis nursery staff by the parents of individual children. Medical staff also need to assist with training and be on call at all times for medical emergencies. (See ARCH Factsheet Number 11 for information about crisis nursery services for children who are medically fragile.)

Crisis nursery programs need to be culturally sensitive and able to relate effectively with people of diverse backgrounds. This diversity includes not only race and ethnicity, but also religion and socioeconomic status. The staff of the program should reflect the diversity of the community or region it serves. In a bilingual community, the staff should include members who speak more than one language. Use community members, family members, and consultants from different racial, ethnic, and religious communities, to discuss and teach staff about various cultures, including food, hygiene, and child care practices. A program is truly accessible when people of different ethnic, religious, racial and income groups feel the program understands, accepts, and values them.

Summary

While the parents who contributed to this factsheet identified many concerns, they also expressed gratitude for the existence of crisis nursery programs. As one parent described it, the crisis nursery program gave her a "feeling of security in knowing that my children were in a safe environment with loving, caring staff." Crisis nursery programs do offer parents and their children a community safety net during times of need. Crisis nursery programs send a message to parents that they are not alone. Parents see the crisis nursery programs as the beginning of a time to learn different ways of coping. Many parents leave the program feeling better about their own parenting skills.

Using a crisis nursery program for the first time is often a difficult decision for parents to make. Parents need to be treated with dignity and respect. Parents need to be offered support and praise for being strong and wise enough to seek the services they need for themselves and their children. It is through being a supportive partner with the parents during a time of crisis that trust is built and the parents will come to view the program as positive.

See ARCH Factsheet Number 1 for additional information on crisis nursery care.

References

For information on capacity building and families, (The Family Unity Model), contact: James Nice, Family Preservation Program Specialist Oregon Children's Services Division 198 Commercial St. S.E., Salem, Oregon 97310-0405, (503) 378-3016.

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About the authors: **Becky Montgomery**, A.C.S.W., is a planner, consultant, and trainer in child abuse and neglect issues. In addition, she is an active community member, involving herself in the local school board and local community service agencies.

Nancy Smith is a Regional Coordinator for the ARCH National Resource Center. She has worked on the development and implementation of programs in health and human services for over twenty years.

Belinda Broughton is Director of Training/Technical Assistance for the ARCH National Resource Center, a parent, and an advocate for children and families.

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